

Cultural History at Risk: Independent Media and Preservation Independent Media Arts Preservation, NY (2000)

American television and video heritage is now at a crossroads. One direction leads toward catastrophic losses of film and videotape, with the possible exception of studio and network programs in corporate archives that can be recycled for new income. Another direction leads toward the managed preservation of extant television and video materials that bear an important relationship to American history and culture regardless of their reuse potential or monetary value.

— William Murphy, Report on the Study of American Television and Video. Library of Congress, 1997.

When pioneering artists, activists, and TV producers picked up the first video portapak in the late 1960's/ they did so with passion, but rarely with a thought to the longevity of their works ten, twenty, or one hundred years later. Although the clunky 1/2" open reel decks and cameras were a far cry from the palm camcorders of today, they represented the same impulse: to allow anyone to produce tapes derived from their own experience and imagination. Almost immediately after portapaks were introduced, non-profit centers sprung up across the country, dedicated to providing low-cost access to these new production tools. Electronic news gathering became an expected part of the TV viewing experience, a step away from the standard of studio productions. Venues for independent productions expanded, ranging from public television and cable, to libraries, community centers and street fairs.

Working with tools that are dependent on the marketplace - produced at first primarily for a broadcast market, and later also for industrial or consumer use - independent producers were almost immediately confronted with the reality of obsolescence. For the most part, new tape formats and equipment were embraced with enthusiasm, as makers enjoyed improvements in picture and sound quality, ease of use and the addition of color and special effects. Tapes began to stack up, a study in changing production tools: 1/2" open reel, Betamax, 3/4", VHS, I". Just as families have tucked their treasured 8mm films away in a drawer, these historical works were shelved, to be dealt with at a future date. Thankfully, prudent people also saved the old equipment, knowing it would be needed to view or transfer early works.

In the early 1980's/ the first articles began appearing in media arts journals calling attention to the issue of preservation of independent media works. Tapes barely fifteen years old were unable to be played without bringing decks to a halt, risking loss of the signal and permanent damage to the tapes. It was recognized that not only were the majority of early media works unavailable, they were also at immediate risk of being lost forever.

Producers and media center staff started to experiment with tape cleaning and transfer. They also began making tape lists and sharing experiences of preservation projects. The media arts field slowly awoke to the enormity of the preservation problem, and realized that, without a serious and sustained collaborative effort, its brief history would be lost. Looking around, they recognized

there were many others dealing with the same problems — public television producers, dance companies, libraries, audio artists, and community organizations. While experts in production, many groups with significant collections are unfamiliar with moving image preservation, conservation and collection management, and lack staff to perform such tasks. Thus, independent media collections remain largely uncatalogued, and unavailable or underutilized. Just as Hollywood film has been the focus of film preservation, video preservation has been largely focused on broadcast television.

While in the past ten years there has been significant progress toward saving independent works, the media arts field is well aware of its position at the crossroads. Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP) has been formed to provide new leadership for the field's preservation initiatives and to ensure the preservation of independent electronic media for cultural and educational use by future generations. While the media arts community is the catalyst for IMAP, the organization embraces all forms of independent electronic media: time-based, non-commercial production incorporating video or audio, including but not limited to video art, audio art, and technology-based installation art. Also included are independent documentary and narratives, community media, and arts and cultural documentation.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA AS A CULTURAL INVESTMENT

"Without a consideration of the contributions of video pioneers...any history of American television, not to mention recent American social history, will be incomplete, distorted."

— Deirdre Boyle, historian and educator, testifying at a 1996 hearing for the Report on the Study of American Television and Video.

Non-commercial media was first created when the availability of relatively low-cost, portable production equipment made it possible for tapes to be made outside of the broadcast studio structure. Arts and cultural organizations became focal points for early productions, and thus house some of the most extensive collections of independent media. The collections are scattered throughout the country in rural areas, small cities and urban centers, in a host of locations: libraries, museums, media arts centers, artists' spaces, college media departments, video collectives, non-profit distributors, and public television stations. In addition, thousands of individual producers have their own collections, with unique materials stored in attics, closets and make-shift libraries.

The majority of independent media has been produced with substantial funding from public agencies such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and from private foundations including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. These collections of visual and sound works represent a major investment of public and private funds in a tremendous historical and cultural legacy. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the work remains out of the reach of scholars, educators, and the public.

Artists' works include single or multi-channel works, presented in performance or as installations, in real-time, using time delays, or as edited pieces. Subject matter and approaches vary widely,

from traditional documentaries, to narrative, conceptual, or image-processed work. Early works by nationally known artists such as Steina and Woody Vasulka, Nam June Paik, William Wegman, Bill Viola, Mary Lucier, Shigeko Kubota, and Joan Jonas are present in the many collections, as well as countless other artists that came later. Electronic media also has provided a new means of arts and cultural documentation. Taping has served as the only record of countless ephemeral arts events, in such disciplines as dance, theater, literature and performance art. Through interviews and other recordings, an artist's processes, techniques and ideas are preserved for study and teaching.

Federal, state and private dollars have also supported many projects promoting the use of video as a tool for community development/ dialogue and education. Through non-profit media programs, communities and individuals have been given the means to explore these dynamic and powerful tools of production. Early projects such as Broadside TV in Appalachia, University Community Video in Minnesota, and the Alternative Media Center in New York, were examples of this perspective. On a more grass roots level, early projects ranged from perspectives on Puerto Rican identity (in the collection of Centre de Estudios Puertorriquenos) to national politics such as the 1972 Republican National Convention and the first Women's Liberation March in New York City (Media Bus). Public television and community-based media grew out of democratic traditions and expressed such democratic ideals as free speech, equal opportunity, active participation in government, and government responsiveness. Diverse sources of media programming allow all people, regardless of race, creed, religion, income, or political ideology to speak, share their cultures, and take part in the development of their local communities and our national identity.

As the field of independent media has continued to grow and develop, it has achieved recognition as a significant social and cultural phenomenon worthy of study and preservation. Interest in electronic arts production, as well as in the history of media and communications, continues to grow, and departments are being created and expanded each year. There are many possibilities for research, education and public programming of these materials, including but not limited to the areas of social/political history, cultural/ethnic studies, women's studies, local history, the history of media and communications and the history, theory and criticism of the arts, including media arts, dance, theater, music, crafts and photography. The preservation of these materials will significantly advance scholarship and research, enhance public education at the secondary, undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate levels, and provide new opportunities for public programming.

IMAP is committed to a fundamental tenet of independent production: that media tools are more than their common commercial use suggests. They are powerful tools for communication and creativity in a democratic society. In addition to the inherent value as single productions, independent works also trace the history of our culture's use of telecommunications technology, and document in a compelling visual form our unique social and cultural history. These artworks, documentaries, and cultural recordings provide an important connecting thread between the past and present of our society's use of media technologies.

SHARED PRESERVATION NEEDS IDENTIFIED

"...the fragility of independent video ...is a grim spectacle that resembles a sandy beach awaiting its annual visit by a Caribbean hurricane. The grains of iron oxide, like grains of sand, will be swept away unless they are trucked to safety; in our case to a video archive..."

— Robert Haller, Anthology Film Archives, testifying at a 1996 hearing for the Report on the Study of American Television and Video.

As the media arts community has become more proactive in the last decade, a number of key strategies have been identified through regional and national meetings, research, and consultation with preservation experts.

- All key collections must be catalogued in a compatible information system accessible through recognized research networks.

While many institutions have attempted in their own ways to document and save their collections, there is currently no infrastructure to allow intellectual access to many collections, especially to tapes from 1985 and earlier. Thus, access to these collections is extremely limited, and in many cases impossible. Most groups also have no comprehensive paper records, coordinated paper catalogs, union lists, paper indexes or any other useful finding aids. As noted above, these organizations are typically unfamiliar with standard cataloguing practices. In addition, computer and human resources are often limited, existing hardware and software vary greatly, and there are few available training programs to teach cataloguing and description of moving image collections. For individual producers and artists, the challenges are especially severe.

The lack of descriptive information handicaps the field, keeping it in a holding mode. Without a catalog of titles, there is little hope of convincing an archive or hinder that the collection is deserving of preservation dollars. Cataloguing enables groups to prioritize which tapes and/or collections to tackle first, as part of a long-term preservation plan. It also allows them to work with others to preserve tapes held by a number of different organizations or individuals.

Independent media collections, in particular video art and community television, also offer unique challenges for collection management, beyond the physical care of the material. Collections may contain work that was donated, produced on-site, or acquired for exhibition or broadcast. Significant works exist in organizations that may not have had adequate staff or expertise to properly document their acquisitions.

- There is a need for proper storage and selective remastering, coupled with research and development into new preservation strategies.

In preservation and conservation circles, moving images are still considered a new medium, while in fact, the video medium is nearly thirty years old. Early video works, typically produced using obsolete formats such as 2" quad and 1/2" videotape, are in most serious jeopardy, with irretrievable losses occurring everyday. Most are stored under less than ideal conditions, subject to dust and temperature fluctuations. Many of the tapes have exceeded or are approaching the limits of their shelf life. From age alone, tapes have become fragile, dirty and subject to moisture damage. While there are commercial facilities that store tapes for a price, many groups are unaware

of this option or lack funds for this expense. Most facilities are in or close to large urban centers, making storage impractical for groups outside these areas.

With each passing year, we lose not just the tapes themselves but the equipment and parts, and the ability to re-manufacture them. Also disappearing are the engineers and scientists, the artists and producers, and those who know how and when the works were produced. Equipment obsolescence is an inherent problem of format obsolescence. Because many of the video pioneers are in late middle age, we risk not only losing the work, but the primary people who have the most knowledge of media history. Video installation work is at particular risk, as it is typically technically complex, containing numerous electronic parts.

Immediate re-mastering of key works is essential, both to preserve the works and to enable them to be viewed and used, thus building more interest in them and knowledge of their value. While there are commercial facilities that clean and transfer tapes, such as VidiPax in New York, many groups are unaware of these services or cannot afford to use them. There is a continuing need for sites for testing and open experimentation with archival formats and methods. The work of the Bay Area Video Coalition in San Francisco is an excellent model for an environment in which information is freely shared, with the goal of making the best possible transfer at the lowest possible cost. Their model also links research and experimentation to a site for current production, which makes sense if we are to encourage producers to make archival copies at the time of creation.

- There is a great need for education and capacity-building, especially/or small institutions, marginalized groups, artists and independent producers.

Many institutions that are sites for creation of new work have become de facto archives. These groups need technical assistance simply to begin to approach their collections. With the proper assistance, they can take steps to either expand their missions to include preservation, or they can choose to donate their collections to archives or libraries that value independent media. Simply moving the collections to another archive that does not have the resources to protect the work is not a solution. In the distribution of funding and other resources, we must not force small organizations to compete against major institutions and repositories.

We must recognize that it is not always desirable or feasible to simply transfer collections to existing major repositories. There must be a recognition that tapes of significant value exist in many different cultural and geographic communities, and with small and large organizations. Arts and cultural groups have suffered continual cutbacks in public and private funding over the past five years. Media arts is also one of the most under funded disciplines for arts funding, and most resources go toward production and public programming, not to preservation.

- Funding partners are needed to advance preservation work.

National, regional and local strategies are needed to address preservation issues, as there are groups at all stages of preservation activity: those just beginning their efforts, those who are engaged with preservation, and those who can be leaders or teachers to others. Thus, for preservation to be successful, funding must be provided at all levels, using a range of strategies.

There are relatively few funders who consistently fund preservation. The New York State Council on the Arts has been a leader in preservation funding, along with the National Endowment for the Arts. Yet broadcast-related work has received the lion's share of preservation funding. To save independent work, foundations, individual donors, and corporations all have a role to play.

IMAP is Founded to Address These Challenges

Founded in February 1999, IMAP is a service, education, and advocacy consortium of media arts centers, artist spaces, libraries, museums, university media programs, artists, educators, curators, and others concerned with the preservation of independent electronic media. IMAP's primary interest is to support the preservation of works reflecting the early history of independent media, when, as noted above, producers first expanded the options for media production and distribution beyond commercial applications of electronic tools and traditional forms of broadcast television. IMAP is a key resource for information on the care and preservation of older video formats, and provides referrals for preservation assistance, re-mastering, and information about video collections and historical materials.

NEW LEADERSHIP THROUGH IMAP

"The needs of the independent media arts community merit an on-going task force devoted to preservation and access issues, a task force linking the expertise of local groups with that of nationally recognized centers for video preservation."

— William Murphy, Report on the Study of American Television and Video. 1997.

IMAP was formed to continue the leadership on media preservation formerly undertaken by Media Alliance and others. Since 1991, Media Alliance has provided the media arts field and related disciplines with comprehensive information and technical assistance on all aspects of preservation, and has initiated demonstration projects which have organized and focused preservation efforts. Although Media Alliance is a New York State organization, it has been nationally recognized as a voice for independent media, through such projects as the NY Regional Cataloging Project, the publication of the Magnetic Media Preservation Sourcebook, and active participation in the Library of Congress Study of American Television and Video.

Several founding members of IMAP have also played a key role in advancing video preservation and video history, and bring important skills and contacts to the consortium. Electronic Arts Intermix was the first media arts center to receive preservation funding and has undertaken preservation projects involving major contemporary artists such as Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik and Vito Acconci. In 1998, the Experimental Television Center organized the first major conference on video history, and will launch a web-based Video History Archive in 2000. The Bay Area Video Coalition established the first non-profit remastering center and held two groundbreaking symposiums on the conservation of video art: Playback '96: Video Roundtable, and TechArcheology: Installation Art Preservation.

However, in late 1998 it became clear that, with a very small staff and a modest cash budget, Media Alliance could not realistically attract and manage large preservation projects. IMAP was created

to provide a new organizational structure that would enable a wider geographic scope and a more focused mission. IMAP's activities are focused on services, education and advocacy. As a result of the last decade of work, the media arts field has an excellent track record with projects that can have a broad impact on preservation problems.

IMAP INITIATIVES

IMAP's program priorities for FY2000 are as follows:

- The Cataloging Project

The Cataloging Project builds off of Media Alliance's NY Regional Cataloging Project. It is designed to increase the capacity of organizations and individuals to catalog their media collections using a shared, compatible database. The long-term goal is to create a union catalog of independent media that will be searchable on the Web by producer's name, title of work, and/or subject. The information will then be available to a broad user base, including curators, scholars, educators, students and other artist/producers and archives. IMAP estimates the potential user base will include more than 100 media arts centers, 500 dance companies and 5,000 artists/producers, in addition to thousands of community and university media centers and public television stations.

The Cataloging Project provides an easy-to-use, standardized, data template. IMAP is distributing the IMAP MARC for FileMaker Pro template, developed by consultant Jim Hubbard based on an original design by the National Moving Image Database at the American Film Institute. By March 2000, the template had been distributed to 25 organizations and artists and thus far has been put into use by the following: the Experimental Television Center, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, the Kitchen, Paper Tiger TV, Art Media Studies/Syracuse University, Visual Studies Workshop, and artists Pauline Oliveros, Steina and Woody Vasulka, and Paul Ryan. IMAP has provided technical assistance and training to several of these groups (see Technical Assistance below). With funds from the New York Foundation for the Arts, IMAP conducted a feasibility study for a Web-based tutorial using the template, and determined that this method was the most cost-effective and accessible means of distribution. With start-up funding from the NBA, IMAP will produce the first phase of the Web tutorial site in late 2000. In addition to the central resources of the site — a step-by-step tutorial, a downloadable template, FAQs, and a glossary — IMAP plans to have on staff a Cataloging Coordinator who will support users and organize outreach and evaluation for the project.

- Technical Assistance Program

IMAP has established a technical assistance grant program designed to increase capacity of groups to do preservation and / or preservation planning. Through matching grants, organizations are provided with technical assistance in one of the following areas: preservation surveys and planning/ collection management, cataloging, storage, and care and handling. Seed funds for this project were provided by the New York State Council on the Arts; therefore, the initial program has been limited to New York State groups. With increased funding, IMAP will expand this program to have a regional, and, subsequently, a national scope. Currently, technical assistance has been focused on training in the use of the IMAP MARC for FileMaker Pro template.

- Information Resources

IMAP provides essential information and referral services for the media arts field, as well as arts and cultural groups from disciplines such as dance, performing arts, and theater. In addition, IMAP is continuing the work formerly undertaken by Media Alliance to produce high quality, low cost information resources. To meet the needs of those involved with preservation who are at different levels of expertise, several approaches to information resources are needed. IMAP and its members are developing print and web resources to assist those in the beginning stages of preservation. For example, the Experimental Television Center is publishing Video Preservation Basics, a comprehensive web site of resources and advice. IMAP will use the site as a training resource and will publicize its availability to a broad cross-section of arts and cultural organizations and artists/producers.

A supplement to the Magnetic Media Preservation Sourcebook is needed to pinpoint sources of technical information: where to find equipment, production devices and parts, early tape formats, manuals, schematics, repair guides and other documentation, and technicians, engineers, inventors, and artists who can operate, document, and repair older equipment. This project may be developed in partnership with the Bay Area Video Coalition, which plans to produce a resource guide describing the programmatic, technical and funding history of its remastering facility.

A more long-term project will assist groups in resolving questions of ownership and copyright for materials in their collections. There is a need for commissioned papers on these issues using case studies and offering recommendations for resolving rights, with sample forms and documentation, and guidelines to prevent future problems. Archivists, librarians, producers, rights holders and programmers are among those who should be consulted in the development of such materials.

- Advocacy and Re-presentation

IMAP provides a voice for independent media in national forums that develop policies and projects on broad preservation issues. For example, IMAP has become an active participant in the Association of Moving Image Archivists, and was instrumental in the founding of AMIA's Independent Media Interest Group. IMAP has proposed a plenary session in conjunction with the Diversity Task Force for the AMIA 2000 conference/ designed to educate AMIA members on community-based media, in addition, IMAP promotes greater awareness and understanding of issues of preservation among artists/producers, donors, funders, policy-makers, and the public.

- Storage and Long Term Care of Collections

For the coming years, IMAP has conceptualized two projects that will address issues of storage and long-term care. IMAP will develop an information kit that will facilitate, where appropriate, the deposit or storage of collections in museums, libraries, or other major institutions. Through a survey of these institutions, the project will identify archives that will consider deposit or storage of independent media collections. The toolkit will collect examples of the most common deposit agreements and describe the process of finding and negotiating such relationships.

Funding is also needed to research the feasibility of creating new storage facilities, or upgrading existing facilities on a regional basis. A national survey, along with accompanying regional surveys, are needed to determine how moving images are currently stored, what the costs are, and whether collaborative strategies are possible or desirable.

IMAP Structure and Members

Electronic Arts Intermix provides fiscal sponsorship for IMAP, and the IMAP Steering Committee provides oversight for its activities. Linda Gibson, the executive director of Media Alliance, serves on the IMAP Steering Committee, providing necessary continuity. While the organizational structure has changed, the key players and the leadership for preservation have remained consistent. Mona Jimenez, who coordinated preservation initiatives for Media Alliance between 1993-1998, was instrumental in the creation of IMAP and serves as a fundraising and program consultant to the consortium. Jim Hubbard, lead consultant on the Cataloging Project, is working for IMAP, providing technical assistance and guiding the development of the Web-based cataloging tutorial. Many consortium members have been closely involved with collaborative preservation efforts for nearly a decade, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Kitchen, the Donnell Media Center, the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library, the National Museum of the American Indian, the Jewish Museum, the Experimental Television Center, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, the Art Media Studies Department of Syracuse University, Paper Tiger Television, the Bay Area Video Coalition, and the Video Data Bank. Consortium members provide significant in-kind contributions to IMAP and to its regional preservation activities. IMAP is supported by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

The collections of consortium members include media works from diverse cultural groups, and IMAP will strive to be an advocate for small collections outside of major institutions and works held by individuals or community cultural organizations. IMAP is also concerned with reaching a range of cultural communities, and has reflected this concern in its Steering Committee.

IMAP therefore will bring together the resources of many institutions to benefit the field as a whole.

Ensuring a Central Role for Independent Media

Initially, preservation may not seem as exciting or compelling as the creation or exhibition of new works. However, we do not have the luxury of time as we have had with other mediums — painting, sculpture, works on paper, etc. Electronic artworks have been recognized as the new art of the 20th Century, yet as we turn the corner on the millennium, we could see them disappear as quickly as they appeared. The history of dance and theater should not exist as only drawn and written description without the invaluable experience of viewing the work. Our visual and aural recordings of the last 40 years — seen through the eyes of social documentarians, artists, community organizers, media commentators and everyday citizens — cannot risk being lost.

Without a concerted effort, independent media will have only a token role within a historical legacy dominated by corporate and commercial productions. With the energy and expertise of IMAP and its members, working with new and committed partners, we can ensure that independent media plays a central role and continues as a resource for generations to come.

Thanks to IMAP for permission to reprint this article <http://www.imappreserve.org/>